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ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that examined the potential problems faced by beginning school principals are examined in this paper, with a focus on the obstacles that hinder the practice of interagency collaboration. The study was based on the belief that principals who act as instructional leaders place the needs of learners at the center of all school activities. Data were derived from a review of transcripts of interviews conducted with 122 first-year principals over the past 5 years. Findings indicate that overall, the beginning principals said that they had not behaved as instructional leaders and promoters of interagency collaboration. Inhibiting factors were identified as those existing within the individual administrator, those in the immediate environment, and those related to preservice preparation. Recommendations are made to help principals act as brokers of community resources for students: (1) provide contacts with social service agencies (the responsibility of administrator preparation programs); (2) develop mentoring programs between administrators and representatives of social-service agencies; and (3) offer teacher inservice education that redefines the teacher role in terms consistent with the development of interagency linkages. (LMI)

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LEADERSHIP FOCUSING ON THE NEEDS OF LEARNERS: PROBABILITY OR EMPTY HOPE FOR NEW PRINCIPALS?

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LEADERSHIP FOCUSING ON THE NEEDS OF LEARNERS: PROBABILITY OR EMPTY HOPE FOR NEW PRINCIPALS?

For the past ten to fifteen years, there has been an increasing recognition in the literature related to the role of the school principal that one of the key ingredients in effective schools is the effective principal. More specifically, "effectiveness" of the principal has increasingly been defined in terms of an individual being able to provide instructional leadership for the school. While many have tended to describe instructional leadership largely as the activity of a principal which involves more direct involvement with teachers and the teaching process, we believe that commitment to instructional leadership involves much more than more effective supervisory activity. In short, we believe that instructional leadership may be viewed in terms of the principal engaging in behaviors and activities which have as their foci the improvement and enhancement of the individual school's focus on the needs of student learners. In short, we believe that principals serving as instructional leaders are individuals who place the needs of learners at the center of all school activities.

With this definition in mind, and with our earlier work associated with the discovery of the needs of beginning principals, the research described in this paper was directed toward learning whether or not it

was likely that individuals in the first years of service as building administrators would be able to serve as instructional leaders. We wanted to know if it is realistic to assume that new principals could truly perform in ways that were truly focused on the needs of student learners. Was it realistic for beginners to be expected to carry out the same activities and engage in the same kinds of behaviors that would enable them to be as focused on student needs as more experienced colleagues?

Background

As discussions concerning the development of strategies to promote more effective educational programs for children are carried out by researchers and practitioners, one theme emerges as a strategy that may be used to promote greater focus on student needs. That strategy has been identified by Levine and Lezotte (1990) and others (Levine, 1991; Payzant, 1992; Jehl & Kirst, 1992; Kirst, 1993) as one important way to promote greater focus on student learning needs involves the development of collaborative arrangements among schools and a wide variety of social service agencies which have interests in the needs of children. Discussions of efforts to promote unified delivery of social services to children continue and are promoted by, among others, the Danforth Foundation. There appears to be little doubt that this type of thinking has great implications for the ways in which schools of the future might operate. Cyphert (1987, p. 86) noted the following

regarding our assumption of the value of interagency collaboration as a central feature of more effective schooling:

> An increasingly apparent fact of life in today's society is the complexity of human problems and people's needs. The phenomena with which helping professionals deal are becoming more and more interrelated and multidimensional. It is, consequently, more difficult and unrealistic than ever for a practitioner in any one profession to possess the expertise to solve human problems unilaterally. A teacher frequently needs the assistance of a social worker, psychologist, health professional, and/or clergy in order to solve a student's learning problem. The physician who heals the physical problem must recognize the frequently attendant psychological, financial, and family difficulties of the patient. Professionals must now learn to communicate and cooperate with practitioners in other professions if the scope of the intervention is to match the scope of the client's need.

If there is a general acceptance of the vision which suggests that integration of social services is an important way to promote student learning and child development, we may assume that schools might no longer be viewed as agencies with a unique and separated role from all other agencies in society such as health care organizations, social welfare groups, or community counseling clinics, for example. If this vision of the future for schools in society becomes a reality, and schools may be transformed legitimately from "Places for teaching" into "Places for learning," we may also assume that different patterns of behavior will be needed by educational leaders of the future.

The educational leader of the future will increasingly need to be more concerned with the direction of an environment that is conducive to supporting a variety of needs of learners. Schools, therefore, will

likely become centers of community development and support (Bruner, 1991). Those who are charged with the administration of schools will need to adapt to the new vision. There is a potential problem, however, when one realizes that few individuals who are first moving into school administrator positions are likely to be prepared for this new vision and version of educational leadership.

In addition, research (Duke, 1984; Daresh, 1986; Weindling & Earley, 1987; Daresh & Playko, 1992) in recent years has consistently shown that there are issues that arise in the lives of beginning principals and other leaders which serve to prevent the adoption of leader behaviors which promote unified social service delivery for learners. For example, it has been noted (Daresh, 1986) that beginning administrators' concerns are clustered in three distinct areas: (a) problems with role clarification (understanding who they were, now that they were principals, and how they were supposed to make use of their authority); (b) limitations on technical expertise (how to do the things they were supposed to do, according to job descriptions); and (c) difficulties with socialization to the profession and individual school systems (learning how to do things in a particular setting--"learning the ropes"). Duke (1988) also found these same concerns present in new principals who were considering leaving the principalship despite the fact that they were generally viewed as being quite effective in their roles. These studies of beginning principals and their needs clearly indicate that, for the most part, those who are

going through the process of transition into the school principalship tend to be concerned about a wide array of issues, but the integration of social services and other approaches to instructional leadership for children are not among their highest priorities.

The purpose of the research reported in this paper is to analyze the potential problems faced by beginning school principals. Our particular interest concerns the nature of problems that may serve as inhibitors to the kind of educational leadership which truly focuses on the broad developmental needs of learners.

Data Source

As a data source for this analysis, we used the transcripts of interviews that we conducted with 122 first year principals over the past five years. These interviews have provided us with considerable information regarding the problems most typically faced by novice administrators. Included are numerous statements regarding the ways in which conditions exist and cause school leaders in many cases to abandon their initial sense of commitment to the goals of supporting student learning as their highest priority.

Our analyses of beginning principals' interviews have indicated that there are certain key factors that are part of the daily professional lives of school administrators. In many cases, these factors serve to inhibit leaders' abilities to focus on the needs of learners in their schools in favor of maintaining the smooth operation of the school as an organization.

Specifically, the questions that have been asked to provide us with insights into this issue are:

- To what extent have you been able to engage in behaviors, during your first year as a principal, that you might classify as those needed by an instructional leader?
- If you have been prevented from behaving as an instructional leader to the extent that you wanted, what factors have served to inhibit you from achieving that goal?

Although these questions were not designed specifically to elicit statements regarding the issue of interagency collaboration as a form of instructional leadership, several respondents specifically talked about the desirability of this practice. Further, the researchers pursued this issue when it was not specifically noted by respondents.

Central Findings and Conclusions

As interview data were analyzed, it was apparent that, for the most part, beginning principals do not express the fact that they have been able to behave as instructional leaders. By and large, this is related to a general sense of frustration on their part concerning the extent to which they believe they are performing up to their own personal levels of performance and expectations.

The types of inhibiting factors which beginning principals reported as issues that blocked the likelihood of their performing as instructional leaders and promoters of interagency collaborative efforts were clustered in three distinct areas: (1) Inhibitors from

within the individual administrators; (2) Inhibitors in the immediate environment of the administrators; and (3) Inhibitors resulting from preservice preparation programs.

Inhibitors within Individuals

Some of the factors which appeared to inhibit individual principals from engaging in the types of behaviors that would have promoted interagency collaboration as a way to promote more student-centered practice were related to perceptions of individual beginning principals. Simply stated, some individuals did not believe in the value of working with agencies external to the school system. It was not part of the individual educational platforms espoused by some. As one first year middle school principal noted,

> It's really not my job to go out and work with social workers and so forth. I've been hired to run a school. That's what I want to do and that's what I plan to do. Besides, I really don't think that working with the court system or the local social workers is something I feel comfortable with doing.

In some cases, beginning administrators also expressed beliefs which suggested that they were clearly not predisposed to view their new roles in terms of being the primary promoters of student learners and their needs. In other words, there appeared to be a basic value conflict regarding possible appropriate roles for school leaders which comes from with the perceptions of the novice leaders. Often we heard people say that they were "in the business of running schools," and

that they were not inclined to look out for other ways of supporting child development.

As the first year or two of an administrator's career continued, another personal inhibitor to the promotion of collaborative programming appeared. A frequently-heard statement was that, as a principal, there are too many demands on people to enable them to "out of their way" to look for new ways of supporting student learning and development. In this regard, one second year elementary principal noted,

> After all, I'm an educator, not a social worker. I truly do care about the children in my schools. But there are just so many minutes in a day... And I can't do it all.

Inhibitors in the Immediate Environment

Most statements regarding the issues that prevented beginning administrators from focusing more directly on student learning needs were related to conditions that were described as part of the immediate external environment in which the principals worked.

One example of such an inhibitor in the environment of principals was related to their teaching staffs. School staff were frequently noted as major inhibitors to the ability of an principal to conceptualize his or her role in terms of providing for unified social service delivery or, for that matter, other practices associated with more focused instructional leadership. Teachers were reported to have expressed strong reluctance to become involved with a vision of effective educational practice which might bring them into contact with

agencies external to the school. In a relatively short period of time, then, the beginning principal learns that it is no longer worth the effort to push this agenda. They stop seeking support and commitment from their teachers:

> After a while, I felt like I was banging my head against the wall. I had enough of teachers saying things like, "If I had wanted to be a social worker I would have gone that route. I'm a teacher. Period."

Principals also reported that some school district policies appeared to make it nearly impossible to promote a vision of social service delivery being provided through schools. Furthermore, most individuals reported ongoing "turf" battles among a multitude of social service agencies in their communities which, in turn, served to block serious discussions of more coordinated efforts to support the needs of individual learners.

The typical daily job demands on principals, whether they are new to the profession or not, often make it difficult if not impossible for individuals to find time and energy needed to work toward coordinated approaches to dealing with student needs in their schools. Many individuals noted that "there aren't enough hours in a day" to allow them to do all that they wanted to do for children. This caused apparent frustration on the part of many who indicated, as a response to other questions posed during their interviews, that they went into education and administration because they believed that it would be a way to "help kids."

Inhibitors Related to Preservice Preparation

The final category of inhibitors was related to beginning administrators' perceptions that they were ill-prepared to carry out leadership roles which required contact with a wide array of social service agencies normally defined as external to schools. This represents an area of concern identified by virtually every respondent in our interviews.

New principals reported that they simply did not believe that they had adequate preservice training as part of their preservice preparation. They were not comfortable in a role that they believed required them to work with many different social service agencies. Their traditional preparation programs tended to emphasize the need to acquire traditional administrative task area skills such as budgeting, personnel management, and so forth. Beginning school principals reported that they simply were not familiar with the world of social service agencies. As a result, they were either timid about approaching individuals in those settings, or they simply did not instinctively think about the value inherent in talking with community agency representatives. When they were teachers, prior to participating in administrative training programs, they never became involved in schemes that put them in contact with representatives of social service agencies. A comment made by one novice principal may be the most succinct statement of this issue:

> When I went through the certification program at X university, I never even heard one prof talk about looking at these other groups. I mean, we had a course in community relations, but the emphasis there was on how to put together a good newsletter, or how to work with a PTA. But we never considered the issue of working with police departments, social workers, hospitals... Now, as a principal, I realize that I have to do that kind of contact. But I'm learning all this from a kind of ground zero.

Implications

It would be a gross overstatement to say that, simply because we find that beginning principals do not engage in activities associated with the promotion of interagency collaboration, they are not able to call themselves instructional leaders. We assume that, even when they are not developing collaborative relationships with social service agencies, they may be engaging in a variety of other activities that establish them as principals who focus on the needs of individual children quite well. Nevertheless, the findings of this work suggest a variety of actions that might be taken in order to promote a vision among beginning principals which is more consistent with the vision of the school principal as someone who serves as a broker of many different community resources for children.

One example of a way in which the vision of future beginning principals might be shifted toward using the community as a way to deliver services needed for children is found in the nature of preservice administrator preparation programs. Such programs might include more opportunities for individuals to have regular and meaningful contact with representatives of a wide variety of social service agencies. In this regard, existing programs such as the

Interprofessional Education Program at The Ohio State University (Casto, 1987) might be examined for potential applications to other settings. In this way, people might be able to walk into their first positions with some sense that they are ready to work with representatives of many different groups which can benefit the students in their schools.

Another way in which principals and other administrators might be assisted in their efforts to gain comfort and expertise in working with interagency collaboration involves the use of mentors. As people move into new professional settings, mentors with experience in a multitude of settings may be recruited to work with beginning school administrators to help them define their roles in broader terms. Often, mentoring programs for administrators is seen only as a way to pass along information about how to do the job of the principal for the sake of survival. We might envision a situation wherein several mentors, perhaps from two or three different social service agencies, might be available to work with the new principal on an ongoing basis to reinforce the ability of the novice to work comfortably with different agencies.

Inservice programs might also be designed and offered to teachers as a way to help them understand their roles in terms of broad-based learner needs. Teachers have typically been prepared through systems which focus almost exclusively on such traditional issues as pupil control and in-class instruction. Needed are ways to help people

appreciate that teaching (and leading) is now often a much more complex task than it had been in the past. We believe that, if teachers are able to define their roles in terms consistent with the development of interagency linkages, it will be much easier for educational administrators to maintain such programs that benefit children.

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